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Legislation protecting the Mackinac Bridge introduced in Michigan State Senate

LANSING – Legislation codifying an agreement reached by the Mackinac Bridge Authority and the administration into statute has been introduced in the Michigan State Senate and House of Representatives, announced Sen. Jason Allen, and Reps. Tom Casperson and Kevin Elsenheimer.

Bills were introduced in the Senate on Tuesday and similar bills are expected to be introduced in the House today.

“Codifying this agreement into law will help reassure Michigan residents that the Mackinac Bridge is in safe hands,” said Allen, R- Traverse City. “In my opinion, a good agreement will make an even better law.”

Senate Bill 829 repeals the section of law that stipulates that the MBA will revert to Michigan Department of Transportation control once the bridge debt is paid, allowing the authority to retain control of decision making in perpetuity.

SB 830 would amend the Executive Reorganization Act to specify that the MBA is an autonomous entity within MDOT.

When signed into law, SB 831 would remove the stipulation that the state treasurer serve as treasurer of the MBA, allowing the authority to manage the finances of the bridge.

Finally, SB 832 outlines the specific functions the MBA would be responsible for, a list which comes directly from the governor’s agreement with the MBA and MDOT. It also allows the MBA, at its sole discretion, to contract with any agency including MDOT, for the administration of those functions.

“It was reassuring to see the bridge authority able to work out an agreement with the administration after the initial take over blow up,” said Casperson, R-Escanaba. “These laws will help future leaders recognize each others’ responsibilities and reduce the chance of misunderstandings or control issues down the road.”

Under the agreement, the Michigan Department of Transportation director will defer to the judgment of the Mackinac Bridge Authority on all matters related to the traditional powers, duties, and functions of the MBA.

The agreement was signed by the governor, MDOT Director Gloria Jeff and Mackinac Bridge Authority Chair William H. Gnodtke.

Although the agreement between the Mackinac Bridge Authority and the administration fully restores power to the authority, the agreement needs to become statute to prevent possible future takeover attempts.

“The Mackinac Bridge often is associated with Michigan tourism, but it symbolizes more than that,” said Elsenheimer, R-Bellaire. “It is the link between our two peninsulas that unifies and strengthens our state. It’s only common sense that we all work together to ensure the future of that connection with this legislation.”

The Mackinac Bridge Authority predates the existence of the bridge itself. Originally created under Public Act 21 of 1950 to study the feasibility of constructing a bridge to cross the Straits of Mackinac, the Mackinac Bridge Authority has successfully managed the operation and maintenance of the bridge, including the capacity to set toll rates.

At a town hall meeting hosted by Allen, Casperson and Elsenheimer earlier this fall, Jeff’s decision to take away the decades-long responsibilities of the Mackinac Bridge Authority based on her interpretation of attorney general opinions from the 1960s was subject to harsh criticism from northern Michigan residents. This shift of power and subsequent outcry led to the recent agreement.

“The governor’s agreement, while a step in the right direction, is not a permanent solution,” Allen said. “The agreement could be easily changed or revoked and is not binding on future administrations. Therefore, this legislation is necessary to ensure the continued integrity of the Mackinac Bridge.”

Senate Bills 829 through 832, all sponsored by Allen have been referred to the Senate Committee on Transportation.

Casperson and Elsenheimer will introduce identical bills in the House of Representatives later today.

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Editor’s note: Audio comments from Sen. Allen may be downloaded from the Michigan Senate Republican Majority Multi-Media Link web site later today at:
<http://www.senate.michigan.gov/gop/audiowire/index.htm>